

# Island House, Laugharne

*Peter Stopp*

*Island House, in Wogan Street, sits below the castle, between the River Corran and the former Mill stream. It is the oldest known residence in Laugharne. Mary Curtis reported (c.1880)<sup>1</sup> that Roman remains had been excavated in the garden and that part of the house 'was destroyed by accident by the cannon balls fired on the castle by Cromwell's soldiers... one of the balls was preserved in the house up to 1823'. That would date it to well before 1644, and indeed its listing dates parts of it to Tudor times and it is said to have a priest's hole somewhere inside it.*

*Its high status as a building is reflected in the house having been listed grade 2\* and even its garden walls and garage building are each separately listed grade 2 (Figure 1). The buildings have lain derelict for decades. Concern for their continued existence led to the insertion of scaffolding (Figure 7) to support the buildings and continued concern led Carmarthen County Council in July, 2015, to decide to apply a Compulsory Purchase order (CPO) on them. That would usually lead to them being sold on to be restored to working condition. An approach to the Landmark Trust to see if they might be interested in taking that on drew the response that it did not have a historic interest. That response prompted this exploration of its history.*

"Listed II\* as the substantial remains of an important sub-medieval building on an early settlement site close to the castle. High-quality detail, particularly internally, is associated with successive remodelling from the early C19. A substantial house with C16-C17 origins, and a complex sequence of addition and remodelling especially in the early C19. Essentially, the house comprises two parallel ranges aligned with the street, and a large rear wing. A short wing or storeyed porch at the right-hand (SW) end of the

front range is probably contemporary with it, but subsidiary wings linked to the rear wing appear to be C19 additions associated with the provision of additional service accommodation.

Of these various elements, the main range fronting the street comprises a C16-C17 range with contemporary storeyed porch block to right, and a further bay added probably soon after the original construction, as a continuation of the main building line to the left (NE). The large rear wing (an original kitchen) behind this additional bay also represents an early building – possibly even pre-dating the front range. The parallel rear range has detail consistent with an early C19 date. Remodelling of the earlier main range from this time included refenestration (based on earlier openings) and the insertion of a grand staircase (occupying the position of an earlier gable-end chimney), probably re-using elements of an original C17 stair. Service wings associated with rear kitchen wing are probably mid C19."

Fig. 1. Summary of the Listing description for Island House

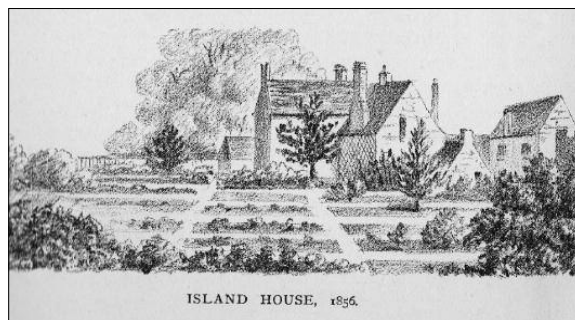


Fig. 2. : Island House in 1856, sketched by Mary Curtis

## ANCESTRY OF THE ESTATE

Working back from the known occupants of the late 19th century, I have tried to trace the history and origins of the building's possible occupants, beginning with Mary Skyrme. Figure 6 shows the whole of the probable line of ancestry uncovered here.

*Mary Skyrme (1813-1885)*

Part of Laugharne Corporation Survey of 1834 (Figure 3) shows Island House, which together with land on the opposite side of Wogan Street forms an 'island' owned, along with many other properties by 'Miss Skyrme'.

Mary Abra Hughes Wienholt died 6 Jan 1885, four years after her husband, Frederick Wienholt who was from Lanarkshire. Mary married him in 1858, when she was 45, so she was 'Miss' Skyrme both when the Tithe Survey of 1842 and the Corporation Survey of 1834 were made of Laugharne. Both documents showed her in possession of Island House and numerous other properties in Laugharne, as well as owning a number of farms around it, including Brixton Farm, Halldown, Delacorse and the town mill (where Select Convenience Store now lies) – all of which are of relevance later.

Analysis of the 1842 Tithe Survey for Laugharne Township revealed three major land owners, with three-quarters of all the listed properties between them. Largest was Laugharne Corporation with 36% of the properties. Next came Lloyd Vaughan Watkins with 16%. He had, with Elizabeth Starke, inherited the properties that belonged to the original Lordship, including the Castle itself. So the origins of their estates are clear. Mary Skyrme came a very close third, possessing 15% of the properties. Clearly, she had inherited a very large estate in and around Laugharne, which included Island House. The aim here is to explore whether we can trace elements of that estate back in time and whether it linked to ancestors of Mary Skyrme.

The 1871 census shows her in Island House, married to Frederick Wienholt and with a resident dressmaker, two domestic servants and a coachman/groom. We can gain a glimpse of the grand life at this time in scraps from her accounts book for 1835/6.<sup>2</sup> They included taking a sedan chair one evening to an assembly at The Globe (about 100 metres up the road from her house!); a 1 guinea subscription to the National School. It was probably in her time that the subsidiary rear service wings were added to the house.

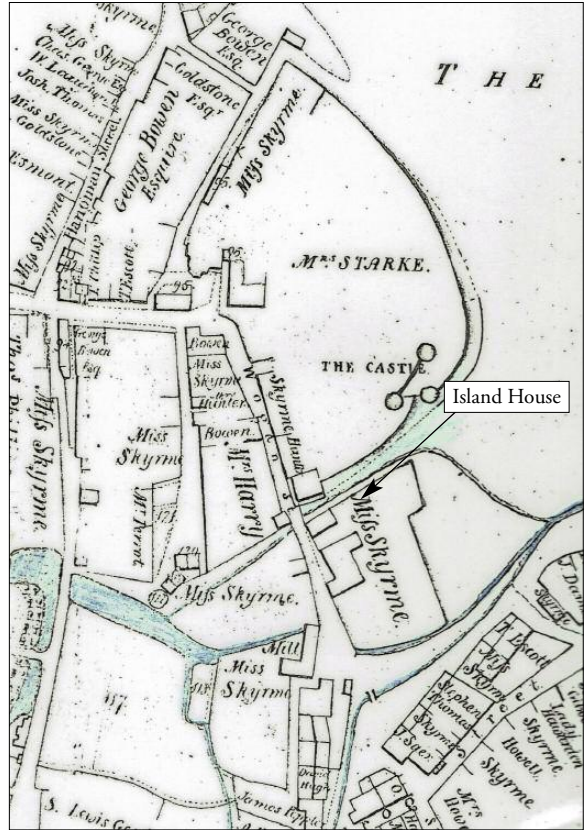


Fig. 3. *Island House and some of Miss Skyrme's properties close by.*  
*From the 1832 Corporation Survey.*

*William Skyrme III (1778-1823)*

Mary Abra Hughes was the daughter of Mary Lewis (from Llanddewi Velfrey) and her first husband, William Skyrme ('of Laugharne and of Alltgoch, Cardiganshire and Launceston, Cornwall'), who had been baptised in Laugharne on 5 Oct 1778. He died in 1823 and the burial records him as of Wogan Street, and therefore of Island House. His wife, Mary, later married George Stackpoole who also died before she did. Her death is recorded as of 3 March 1858 (the same year her daughter got married) and her home is actually given there as Island House. William Skyrme had been Portreeve of Laugharne, and therefore a property owner there, in 1801/2 and again in 1817 and became High Sheriff for Cardiganshire in 1809, so he was a man of some status, for whom such a grand house would have been very fitting. He was perhaps responsible for adding the parallel rear range to the house.

*William Skyrme II (1746-1788)*

Going back a generation, William's father was also called William Skyrme and he, too, was Portreeve of Laugharne, in 1775, and therefore a property owner there. But he was baptised at Llawhaden in 1746, so he came from there to live and eventually to be buried in Laugharne. He was recorded as a member of the Society of Sea Serjeants in 1760.<sup>3</sup> He married, also in Laugharne on 3 June 1775, Jane Hughes, who presumably came from Laugharne,<sup>4</sup> as many such marriages seem to have taken place in the bride's home place of residence. It is possible therefore that he acquired this estate through Jane, but his family clearly had property in Laugharne of their own – probably including Island House. The parish burial recorded him as 'Gent', a very rare appellation in the records, so he had some standing in Laugharne. Following his death the family sold the Vaynor estate.

From here on back in time we cannot be sure that the family ancestors' home was actually in Island House – just somewhere in Laugharne, presumably in a building of appropriate grandeur for such a family. Island House certainly fitted that status and, as we shall see later, we can trace the family possession of the site of Island House back another 200 years.

*William Skyrme I ( -1762)*

The latter William Skyrme's father was also a William Skyrme from Vaynor, Llawhaden. He died on 2 Feb 1762, at Haverfordwest which he perhaps kept as his main home (e.g. his son had been born there), but evidently had property in Laugharne for twice he was Portreeve there – in 1742/3 and 1753.<sup>5</sup> He had married Jane Abra Hughes sometime between 1732 and 1742<sup>6</sup> and I assume it was through her that he possessed her property in Laugharne for she was the sole daughter of John Hughes 'of Laugharne' and Hannah (or Joanne, Joane) Mansel of Trimsaran.<sup>7</sup> Jane was under age when her father died in 1729,<sup>8</sup> and as his wife had predeceased him, Jane was assigned to the guardianship of her uncle, Sir Edward Mansel, 2nd Bart, of Stradey and Trimsaran who was High Sheriff in that year.<sup>9</sup> Soon after, in 1731/2, Sir Edward's brother, Rawleigh Mansel, became Portreeve for Laugharne. Was he able to do so on the basis of Jane's property, perhaps? It looks as though he and his wife, Mary, moved to Laugharne since their eldest son – another Edward Mansel, who later became

the 3rd baronet, was christened in Laugharne on 5 Feb 1730/1<sup>10</sup> and in 1758 he, too, became Portreeve there.

Jane had released her properties in 1762, presumably to her son, William, and she remarried in 1772 and probably moved away as she was not buried in Laugharne. The properties released by Jane Abra Hughes correspond very closely with those later owned by Mary Skyrme.

*John Hughes ( -1729)*

Jane Abra Hughes' father, John Hughes, was described as 'from Alltgoch but of Laugharne', and he was indeed buried in Laugharne, 12 May 1729. His wife was a direct descendant of the powerful and wealthy Vaughan family. She having predeceased him by three years, was also buried in Laugharne, so it looks as though they had made their home here, and indeed he also became Portreeve, in 1727. Her burial entry records her as 'Madam Joanna Hughes', indicating that she retained some status in Laugharne.

*Samuel Hughes ( -?1732)*

John Hughes was the eldest son of Samuel Hughes whose Will left his remaining estate 'not otherwise disposed of' to his second son, David.<sup>11</sup> Presumably that excluded the Laugharne estate having been already disposed of to John.

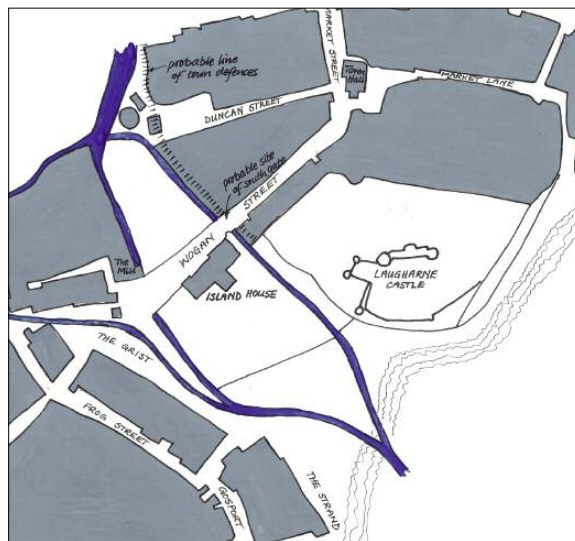


Fig. 4. Island House, based on the 1842 Tithe Map

Samuel Hughes was recorded as 'of Alltgoch, but not living at Alltgoch'. That was perhaps because he was living in Laugharne – for he was Portreeve in 1708, perhaps again through possession of his wife's estate in Laugharne. Howell quotes Habbakuk's observation that 'estates passing to the main line of another family through marriage often continued to enjoy a degree of separate existence... Was that to some extent a feature of this region?'<sup>12</sup> It seems that this may have frequently been the process at work for this Laugharne estate.

*Zacharias Thomas ( -1681)*

Samuel's wife was also a Jane – Jane Thomas,<sup>13</sup> the eldest of three daughters of Zacharias Thomas of Tremollet Manor (or 'Castle'). Zacharias died in 1681 and was buried in Laugharne churchyard, which probably indicates that he, too, had left his family home to move into Laugharne. Properties are not normally specified in wills but in Zacharias's case we have some useful details to enable us to check links in the chain of descent. Zacharias owed John Evans of Trefenty £230 and so in his will of 1681<sup>14</sup> he left Evans the income from four properties – Brixton, Sterne, Old Ouen and Broadyke, all of Laugharne – until such time as the debt had been paid. It will be remembered that Mary A.H. Skyrme later possessed Brixton Farm and also Halldown, which had apparently been previously called Old Ouen<sup>15</sup> so it may be that it was part of an estate passed down to her. Zacharias's will divided his remaining estates between his three daughters with the arrangement that annual bequests be paid to the poor of each of their churches out of the property incomes. Jane would gain the Laugharne estates, but only if she married her cousin, Theophilus Thomas within nine years, after which she could gain the estate anyway. We don't know what was wrong with Theophilus but Jane clearly waited the nine years, gained the estate and married Samuel Hughes. When Thomas Philipps was appointed vicar of Laugharne in 1706 he found that the bequest for Laugharne had not been paid for three years and prosecuted Samuel Hughes unsuccessfully for it. To add insult to injury Thomas Philipps' daughter Elizabeth later married David, a son of Samuel Hughes! Thomas Philipps was clearly put out by that for his own will specifically disinherited that daughter.

*Evan Thomas ( -1668)*

Jane's father, Zacharias Thomas, was the son of Evan Thomas of Tremollet Mansion, who had married as his 2nd wife, yet another Jane, the widow of James Rytherch (Predderch or Preddish or Reddish) of Laugharne. We shall see that James must have inherited a lot of property in Laugharne but he died early, between 1647 and 1668, leaving his brother, Henry as his heir, except for a property called Tally-Corse (probably Delacorse, another of Mary A.H. Skyrme's properties) which was left direct to Jane. Evan died in 1668, before Henry's death as he was alive in 1675/6. Nothing more is known of Henry – perhaps he had no direct family and so the Laugharne estate passed to Jane, if she outlived him, or direct to Zacharias, as he was her eldest son

A date of 1658 is engraved into the lintel of the yard door of Island House, indicating some rebuilding having taken place at this time, perhaps reconstruction following the Civil War damage. If the rumour of a priest's hole within the house is true it might have been inserted in this phase of development. Some were built during the persecutions which followed the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and others whenever persecutions followed later anxieties, such as Titus Oakes' 'Popish Plot' of 1678. Laugharne seems not to have been too troubled by such reactions though Michael Owen, the vicar from 1684 to 1689, did give up the living 'for his conscience's sake'.

*Rhys Prydderch*

Jane's husband, James Rytherch was the eldest son and heir of Rhys Prydderch, of Laugharne, and Dorothy Vaughan, of St Brides, widow of John Adams, of Patrickchurch. According to Francis Jones Rhys 'owned extensive and valuable estates in Laugharne'.<sup>16</sup>

Rhys and Dorothy do seem to be a pair well-matched, though to the terror of the many they crossed! Rhys clearly had some standing for he was made a J.P. and became High Sheriff of Carmarthenshire in 1608 and also gained the occupancy and lordship of Laugharne Castle for four years. However, he was also, in the words of one contemporary, 'negligent, wilful and evil dealing'. He resorted to physical violence on many occasions, including against his own father, James who claimed that he had even killed a local man some years earlier. When the local Sheriff tried to arrest Rhys for nonpayment of debt Rhys physically attacked the Sheriff and kept him a

prisoner until he dropped the charge! Despite that Rhys managed to team up with other 'gentlemen' to obtain the shared lordship of Laugharne and seemed to continually manage to obtain large loans, which numerous court suits show he often failed to repay.

Around this time records show that a Rice ap Retherc (presumably the same person) let his dwelling house in Laugharne to John Ogilvie of Worcestershire, said to be 'a man of great wealth'. Presumably the dwelling house reflected his wealthy status – perhaps that of Island House? A Rhys ap Retherc also provided a property in Laugharne for Richard Acton, his wife, Elizabeth, and servants – Thomas Powell alias Boulth, William Osbourneson and Richard Davys, alias Weaver – all of whom were described as recusants. Indeed, Richard's brother, Robert Acton, was a notorious recusant whose son (also Robert) was later said to have been acquainted with the Gunpowder Plot (1605) but apparently pardoned for his part.<sup>17</sup> Did this favouring of Catholicism also run in the Prydderch family? It does seem likely, and would fit the reputation of a Priest's hole being within the property. However, Roger Turvey is convinced that as Rhys's father, James Prydderch, was a close colleague of Sir John Perrot, whom he has shown to have been firmly Protestant, that seems very unlikely.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of 1601 the castle and lordship had been assigned to Rees Phillips Scarfe in return for substantial annual payments. Rhys Prydderch, perhaps with an eye on obtaining the lordship for himself, clearly took against Rees Phillips Scarfe. Rhys Prydderch tried to challenge Rees Phillip Scarfe's right to the lordship and when that failed resorted to razing the Castle grounds, taking away timbers and 8 tons of lead. In 1608, when he was High Sheriff, he served two writs against Scarfe for non-payments and took all his cattle as payment, to the distress of Rees Phillips Scarfe who begged for their return. They were returned but impounded, and later sold to three agents who promptly sold them to Rhys Prydderch for just £460. When the succeeding Sheriff went to value Rhys Prydderch's stock he was prevented from doing so by Prydderch's servants who had been specially armed for the occasion, whilst his herdsman had hidden the stock from the jury.

Dorothy, Rhys Prydderch's wife, seemed no better. On one occasion, from the gallery of a local house, she directed her servants to attack the Scarfe family living in the Castle, and their shepherds and also Richard Palmer, the Portreeve at the time, as he left his house.<sup>19</sup> This suggests that Dorothy was in sight from the balcony of

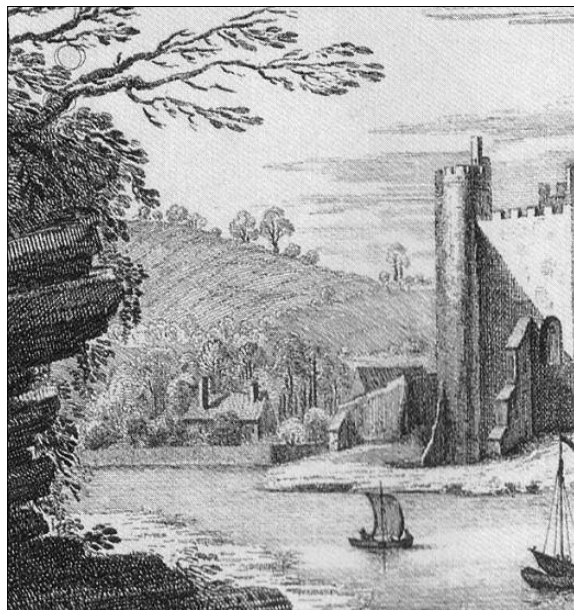


Fig. 5. *Island House*: by Buck, 1740

both the castle entrance and Richard Palmer's house. We don't know where Richard lived but he owned the one remaining burgage plot south of the Castle, next to those of the Prydderch family, probably in the space between Island House and the Castle (Figure 5). If, as seems likely, his home was on that plot then both that and the castle could have been in view from Island House.

Eventually the Castle and lordship were granted to Sir Sackville Crow who sold them on to Sir William Russell. He sided with the Royalist cause in the Civil War of 1644, which resulted in the siege of the Castle on 29th October of that year. After four days of cannon bombardment and a day of frontal siege the castle fell, leaving it in ruins, never to be lived in again. During the bombardment some damage occurred to Island House as well, apparently destroying part of the front range of the building, which is presumably when the cannon ball became lodged in one of its walls.

*James Prydderch ( -1607?)*

Rhys Prydderch was the eldest son of James Prydderch by his first wife, Katherine Phillips of Rushmoor. James had an estate at Hawksbrook, but his main abode appears to have been Laugharne. In 1592 he held there a tenement called Le Sterne (i.e. that later owned by Zacharias Thomas) and the Newe Mill and in 1595

rented the Castle and Lordship of Laugharne jointly with Sir Francis Meyrick.<sup>20</sup> They together complained that the rent was too high and on renewal in 1598 they shared the costs still further for the next three years, before it was reassigned, as we have seen, to Rees Philip Scarfe. James Prydderch became a J.P. in 1595; Justice of Oyer and Terminer for the three Counties in 1598; High Sheriff of Carmarthenshire in 1599 and at some point deputy-steward for the Lordship of Llanstephan. He was clearly a man of status in this region. His will was made in 1607 and proved in 1614, leaving all the remaining estates and stock to his second wife, Bridget, and the offspring of that second marriage. That did not, however, include the Laugharne properties, for they had already been passed on to Rhys Prydderch, as we have heard, sometime after 1595 because a survey of

Laugharne lordship specifically shows the details of James' holdings there at that time.<sup>21</sup>

That survey of 1595 occurred because Sir John Perrot, Lord of Laugharne, had been placed in the Tower on a charge of treason. It showed that James Prydderch possessed no less than 17¼ burgages, and his mother, Katherine Elliott held another three, so that between them they held more than 1 in 8 of all the burgages of Laugharne, plus the water Grist mill and two closes of seven acres (previously obtained from Sir John Perrott in exchange for the farms of Capthorne, Harryslade and Kynnock Mill), the farm called Le Sterne (for which he had exchanged with Sir John Perrott five burgages by the castle for him to create a garden there and six acres of land on asledown), and New Mill. It is impossible to plot with any precision the locations of all his burgage plots but there are several which can be more confidently assigned to him, including the site of Island House.

James Prydderch's burgages include five of the six burgages south of the south gate. It is not clear where the south gate to the town actually lay – it was either somewhere along what is now Wogan Street or opposite the line with Stoneyway, near the junction of Duncan Street with Newbridge. However, Mary Curtis, a notable local historian writing in 1877, states that 'one of the castle gates was by the chapel and just above the bridge by Island House',<sup>22</sup> adding that part of it was built into the chapel. That suggests that she was writing within living memory of part of it being evident. Perhaps it was the south gate? In which case it lay on Wogan Street, just above Island House (Figure 4).

As James had almost all the burgage plots on the south side of the township they must have encompassed the territory of Island House, the single remaining one being held, as we have seen, by Richard Palmer. Parts of the present house are dated to the sixteenth century and so are very likely to have been standing in 1595.

## CONCLUSION

We do not know if all the generations uncovered here of the family actually lived in Island House, but that seems their most probable abode, given its pre-eminence among the houses of Laugharne and the continued status of the family. In its other land-holdings there are also some incidental clues to the estate's continuity.

One manorial site outside Laugharne Township owned by James Prydderch in 1595 was Lestern. Lestern

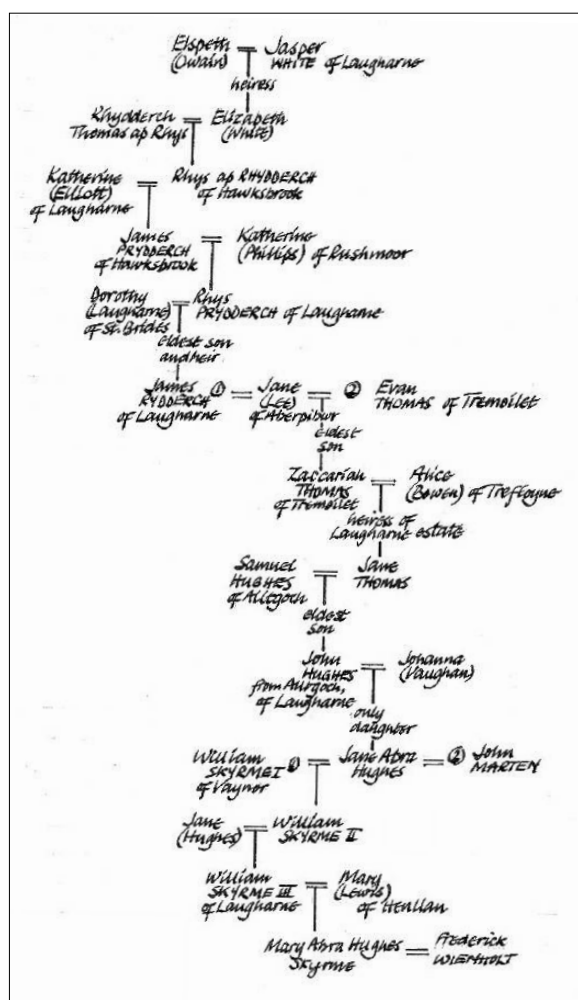


Fig. 6. The apparent descent of ownership of Island House



cannot be located now but it too passed down the family line to at least 100 years later. Being only 12 acres in extent it presumably became simply one or two fields, absorbed into the overall estate, rather than a separate holding. A study of field names in the Tithe Survey of 1842<sup>23</sup> showed nothing that related to the name, though one site, nearly opposite Treventy and belonging to Mary Abra Hughes, which was then called Cole Pit is of the same acreage. Within the township the Town Mill was owned by James Prydderch and was owned two hundred and fifty years later by Mary Abra Hughes Skyrme. Indeed, whilst it is not possible to determine their exact locations, the pattern of distribution of James Prydderch's township burgrave plots is not inconsistent with the later possessions of Mary Abra Hughes.

It would appear then that the properties of James Prydderch in 1595, including (the site, at least, of) Island House, may have been passed down to her via all those other intermediaries virtually intact, though over that time further enlarged. Did James build part of the original Island House, perhaps?

It is possible that parts of the present Island House date even earlier than James Prydderch's time. It appears that James was the first to settle upon the use of a surname by adopting his grandfather's first name. Up to then each successive generation had a first name plus the first name of their father, so James's father was Rhys ap Prydderch, of Hawksbrook, Llangynog who married Katherine Elliott, of Eurewere, Amroth.<sup>24</sup> We have few



Fig. 7. Island House today

dates but hers is known as she made her will on 3 May 1585 and it was proven on 23 Feb 1594, giving her as of Laugharne, widow, and so predeceased by Rhys. Rhys's father was Rhydderch Thomas ap Rhys who married Elizabeth White, 'heirress of Jasper White of Laugharne' and his wife Elspeth Owain.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately I have as yet not found anything more about these earliest ancestors who may have been the original builders of Island house.

The history of this house does seem to have been of greater interest than the Landmark Trust imagined. It would be a tremendous loss should the County Council not succeed with its Compulsory Purchase Order and also ensure that it is properly restored thereafter as a key landmark within the centre of Laugharne.

## NOTES

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3. *TCASFC*, 21, p.4.
4. *Trans of the Hon Soc of Cymmrodorion* 1967 (part 1), The Society of Sea Serjeants.
5. William Skyrme family tree, online.
6. Laugharne Corporation Records.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Laugharne Corporation minutes 1711-1757.
9. Will of John Hughes NLW SD/1729/86.
10. *TCASFC*, 21, 1929, The Society of Sea Serjeants p.21.
11. Will of Samuel Hughes, NLW SD/1732/21.
12. Howell, David W. (1986), *Patriarchs and Parasites: the gentry of S.W. Wales in the Eighteenth Century*, UWP, p.20.
13. Will of Samuel Hughes, NLW SD/1732/21.
14. Will of Zacharias Thomas, Gent., NLW SD/1681/60.
15. E.V. Williams (1963), *Laugharne Corporation*, p.5.
16. Jones, Francis, The Squires of Hawksbrook, *Trans. Hon. Society of Cymmrodorion* 1937/8, p.342.
17. Randall, Alan (1997), Recusancy in Carmarthenshire pp.55-87, Vol XXXIII *The Carmarthenshire Antiquary*, p.64
18. Turvey, Roger (1970), personal communication.
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20. *Ibid.*, pp.27-52.
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22. Mary Curtis, *op cit*, p.90.
23. Tithe Survey of Laugharne 1842.
24. The Squires of Hawksbrook, *Trans. Hon. Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1937/8, p.340.
25. *Ibid.*